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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001944

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV TU

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE OR WINDOW DRESSING

REF: A. ANKARA 6768

1B. ANKARA 6116

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Ankara.

11. (sbu) Summary: In trying to burnish ruling AKP's religious tolerance credentials, Prime Minister Erdogan attended the December 5 opening of a museum at an Armenian Hospital in Istanbul and four days later presided over the opening ceremony for a new mosque-church-synagogue complex near Antalya. Both the Armenian Patriarch and Chief Rabbi accepted invitations to join the PM in Antalya. Members of the Armenian, Jewish, and Protestant communities, however, characterized the appearances as "window dressing" designed merely to put on a show for the EU about Turkey's religious tolerance and harmony. End Summary.

Museum of Brotherhood

12. (u) Founded in 1832 with the permission of Sultan Mahmud II, the Surp Pirgic Hospital in Yedikule is one of four active Armenian hospitals in Istanbul. PM Erdogan attended the December 5 opening ceremony to commemorate the hospital's newly-renovated museum space that exhibits drawings and photographs, religious garments, and antique medical equipment and furniture. Dubbed the "Museum of Brotherhood" for the occasion, the small museum focuses on the history of the hospital and the Istanbul Armenian community, avoiding the sensitive subject of the 1915-6 massacres and deportation of Armenians living elsewhere in the country. The PM's attendance turned the minor event into a gala occasion with thousands of guests and luminaries in attendance. (Note: Poloff particularly noted the slick media kits and public relations efforts directed at foreign diplomats and media representatives. End Note). The PM's speech was replete with paeans to the shared history and culture of Turks and Armenians ("As the children of this country, we have lived together in peace and security for centuries. Our writers, architects, human values, trade, folksongs, and cuisines have mixed...").

Garden of Religions

13. (u) In a similar public display on December 8, PM Erdogan presided over the opening ceremony of a new mosque-church-synagogue complex near the Mediterranean city of Antalya in the tourist resort area of Belek. The opening of the new complex appears to be a direct response to European and human rights critics who have chastised Turkey for not allowing any new churches, even in areas where increasing numbers of foreigners have settled. The leaders of the religious communities in Istanbul were invited to participate in the opening of the new "Garden of Religions," and both the Armenian Patriarch and Turkey's Chief Rabbi featured prominently in the news coverage and photographs. Echoing comments he also made at the hospital, PM Erdogan remarked that "nobody who sees (this)... will be able to ignore this country's identity."

What They Really Think...

14. (c) Members of the minority religious communities in Turkey were quick to belittle the developments. Speaking at a December 10 Istanbul conference, Turgay Ucal of the Turkish Presbyterian Church characterized the "Garden" as mere "window dressing" and "show" for the EU in advance of the December 17 European Council summit. Hrant Dink, editor of the Armenian weekly AGOS, told poloff that while the PM's visit to the hospital was important to the Armenian community, he doubted whether these events signified any kind of meaningful shift in policy on outstanding religious freedom issues. Moreover, we have heard other blunt voices of criticism from within the Armenian community in Istanbul. For instance, the Deputy Director of Surp Pirgic Hospital, who is seen as a "useful fool" for the Turkish state by members of the community exasperated by his attempts to cover up the community's difficulties with officialdom, was slammed for using the opening of the museum to curry favor with the authorities. Lina Filiba, VP of the Jewish Community, admitted that the Chief Rabbi had felt compelled to go Antalya, but that the community had refused to donate a torah and had no plans to send rabbis to perform services in the new "show" synagogue. Finally, according to the daily newspaper Milliyet, Father Alphonse Sammut, who attended the

ceremony in Antalya, claimed that "as long as the rights of Catholics (to open churches) are not recognized, the religious mosaic that we hope for will not be possible." Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's notable absence in Antalya, despite also being invited, was a clear sign that he was reluctant to be used in a photo opportunity so soon after the "ecumenical" furor during the Archons visit (ref A).

Comment

15. (c) Erdogan used both events to try to deflect criticism and put a positive spin on Turkey's record of ethnic and religious tolerance. Nobody we spoke to in the Christian and Jewish communities harbored any illusions that this was anything but an effort to influence the upcoming December 17 European Council decision on Turkey's EU membership application. What will demonstrate true tolerance will be the acceptance on the part of the AKP leadership, grassroots, and Turkish society in general that Christians, Jews and others who are not Muslims are as much Turks as anyone else, and that they have the right to worship and proselytize to the same extent as Muslims.
ARNETT